

The Language of Beads

Janet Goldner



Kandioura Coulibaly is an exceptional artist who makes jewelry and costumes for Malian cinema and theater as well as for private clients. He is also a member of the Groupe Bogolan Kasobane, a pioneer collective of six contemporary artists who have been working together for twenty-five years.

Kandioura has been collecting and working with the stones and beads of Mali since the early 1970s as a way of preserving one symbol of beauty that makes up the culture of the Malian people. He is concerned with preserving the traditions of Mali which are in danger of being lost because of the cultural disruption and erasure that resulted from colonialism. The symbolism—the ancestral heritage—is almost forgotten and many people no longer know the uses and meanings of the traditional ways. Kandioura is a fervent advocate for a society profoundly inspired by local values and knowledge, an ardent defender of the preservation of the originality of Malian and African cultures within contemporary social modernization.

Kandioura and I discussed how and why he began collecting beads and making jewelry, the meaning and importance of beads in Malian culture, the changes that have taken place

over time, and his dream to use his collection to open a bead museum in Bamako, the capitol of Mali in west Africa. The discussions took place in August and September 2001 at Kandioura's house in Bamako, and also included Manon Ouellet, who is working with Kandioura on the classification of his bead collection.

WHY ARE BEADS IMPORTANT?

I started the collection as a child, since I could distinguish my left hand from my right. The first bead I remember was the one I found around my neck. It was put there by my mother. I saw it on other children where I was born, on me, on my brothers, and on my mother. All the children had a cord of beads around their waist, chest, and neck.

Beads were important. Each stage of life had its jewels, its beads. You see beads around the waist of young girls. Young boys have a bead around their necks. You read the stages of life through the beads. I remember the adults at times of work without jewelry but for ceremonies and holidays I always saw them with lots of jewelry. My mother worked hard but for the celebrations after the harvests she wore beads. And then the work started again, and she took off all the big jewels and beads.

For a baby, first they put beads around the waist. They are pretty and at the same time protect the baby. They have a magic and protective role. The beads also massage the baby's waist. They turn around the body of the baby so the blood flow goes where it should. The beads focus the form of the baby



to give it shape because it is limited by the cord. It helps to start to control the body. The beads turn, massage, protect, and are pretty at the same time. They play several roles.

As a child, I didn't have toys. I made things with clay next to a pond. I made everything I wanted to have. I made people and their accessories. And among the accessories, I made beads. Because to see a person without beads was like seeing a tree without leaves or fruits.

Nature made us as we are. We are all humans. What we add to ourselves is what makes the difference between us. Our education, the objects we add to ourselves, our conception of life is what makes our beauty. It is the beauty of beads, necklaces, protective charms, clothes—all accessories that make us what we want to be. Inside everyone there is something. That thing can't be seen unless we make it come out in some way and augment it.

There was a period when the women sold their jewelry to save their families, to enable their children to live. I saw this period. I said to myself, yes we are here; the beads are in the process of leaving. They don't leave an image or a trace so that one can witness that the beads have left this zone and those who sold them, sold them to save their family, to save their stomachs, when nothing was left except their beads.

I had no money at all. And the little I found, when I managed to survive, I put it into the beads so that a few could stay as a heritage, a witness of the life of the beads in a part of this country. That is what pushed me. The leaving was something I witnessed and because I was a witness, I had to save the beads. And that was my beginning, to save these old images that were here, that left by force of poverty, of drought; therefore, it was this moment that found me at the market.

I saw that beads give people something good that we are in danger of losing. They were beautiful like leafy flowering trees. The young people today don't know this. The beauty says nothing to them. For those who know, it hurts to see the youth today who can't appreciate this beauty.



When I started to make costumes, this permitted me to research beads and to bring them back with the clothes that I made.

I use beads in my art. They are like a tube of paint for me. My canvas is the body. In composing a necklace, it is a brush. I make a mark on the body with the necklace and even more so when I clothe people. I make a harmony with the beads. They act on my art like my tube of color. Each bead is a mark of color on my palette.

WHAT ARE BEADS?

Beads are like an alphabet to construct speech, the letters that permit us to say a beautiful word. Yesterday they were instruments of affection, protection, reconstruction of family, the bank of the family, the most important object that created the marriage, and the children.

The bead, an oval ball, is made to be looked at and touched. It symbolizes the eye. Beads are round like the round house of Africa, around the family, like the beads that surround the neck. Symbolically one enters a house, like one enters in a

bead. The hole allows it to roll, to circulate in space, on the body, aligned with the energy of the body. Beads that people put on the body have importance for me—bone, gourd, nuts, shells, wood, gold, sized and polished stones, metal, plastic, or glass. The beads, once fabricated, travel around the world, across the nodes of commerce. It is important that the hole is the one thing that all the beads have in common. Through the hole passes the thread. Together the holes and the thread symbolize the family, the cord that holds the members of the family. The old historic beads are like the grandparents who are next to the family. They advise the children.

Beads are important because they are witnesses of the life of someone. They were on the body and listened a long time to the building of the body of the one who wore them. They were around their neck, the border between the head and the body, through which passed all the



sound. All the communication between the head and the heart passes through the neck. They were next to the eyes, for the eyes of others. They started to be charged by the body and they also charge the person. For me, beads are mystic.

Beads are important because they are the work of artists. In each bead, in each necklace, there is a composition, the thoughts, the reflection of the person who composed it and also of the person who wears it. When you see these objects on the body, they excite the vision of others and they give confidence to the body. They are like witnesses, advisors to the body.

What can you add to a person that is not part of their personality that has the presence to make life more pleasant visually? Make life beautiful? There is clothing, but there are also these very sensitive small objects. Each person has a design around them, so to respect their design, I wait until a necklace is put to use. Then I adjust and make it in harmony with the body. I make it smaller or add something. The beads wait until this day to be regulated and in harmony with the body of the person who will wear them. There are as many varieties of beads and necklaces as there are humans themselves. In all the cultures of the world there have been necklaces.

Traditional religious leaders of the Dogon people wore certain stones because the stones gave strength and energy—a vibration to these men. They knew they were not alone in nature. There were objects next to them in nature that permitted people to live in harmony with nature. What the people lacked, the objects could give them. In all the medicines you will find the charges in the stones. But you have to know and the old ones knew. Now the knowledge is lost and the objects became the objects of the museum.



CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR COLLECTION?

This collection is different because it is the collection of African beads by an African. In what I've read, it is always Europeans who talk about beads. The Europeans have their hypothesis. And we, with our feet on the soil here, can form other hypotheses. There are people in Africa today who make beads of powdered glass, there are people who work stones. The first beads that were found were in Africa. The other hypothesis says that everything came from elsewhere but even today in the sites, we find balls of stones that were sized, worked but without their holes yet. And

we find the tools for working the stones in the sites.

We know that beads of glass powder were developed in Egypt 10,000 years ago—faience. The technique of glass-powder bead making was transmitted by Egyptians to the Greek and Roman empires. This technique traveled in these large empires. To read the books, we get the impression that all that is beautiful doesn't come from Africa. It must be rough and hard and when it's refined, that's not Africa.

But it isn't us, the Africans, who said this.

My vision of beads is that they are connected to their environment. For example, the spindle weight from Djenné for spinning cotton is a terra-cotta ball. The ball makes the force that turns the rod. That force makes the ball of cotton thread that is round like the earth itself. The earth turns, and the earth, in turning, solidifies, and the spindle weight, in turning, solidifies the cotton. The beads turn around the neck and all the muscles of the head are massaged.



**HOW DO YOU ENVISION
YOUR MUSEUM?**

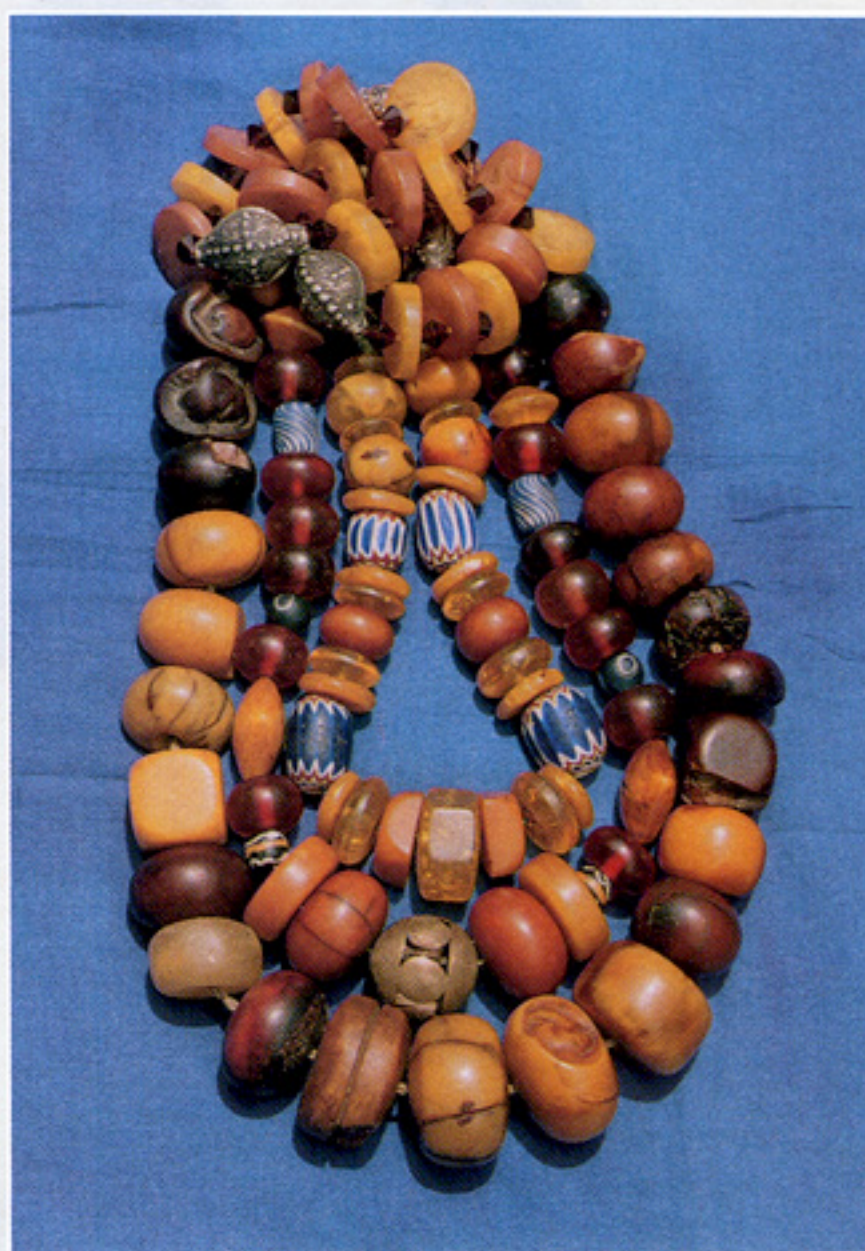
In the Malian earth, there are these treasures. The time passes, people die, others are born, the earth buries things, it rejects them. Beads follow the same path as all objects in nature. One moment they are abandoned, today everyone wants the small things that shine.

The beads are here like a witness to the ages, like the roots of a period that is no longer. The people have forgotten their life and their past. The museum will permit me to reconstitute a taste for these objects from the past in another way, to be able to reconcile the beads one day with their family.

The museum is a dream that exists in me. If it doesn't exist, the beads can continue to live otherwise. But I want it to exist. Everyone lives pregnant with something in their interior. The door opens and it closes leaving something. Everything doesn't come out. Therefore it is in the tomb, like the ancestors who buried people with their jewels.

I am African; I found the beads in Africa and I work on African customs. When I create I must have my strength in a culture, and it is from this culture that the force of the museum should be launched if it is good, positive, and strong. It could be positive but not have strength. This strength is the people around me, who say yes we think it is a good idea and can help me do it. The museum can only exist with the effort of many people.

We have started cataloging and classifying the beads in the collection in accordance with international terms and systems of classification. We started with the stones because humans started to



make beads with what they had around them—bones, shells, and stones. It is incredible, all the subjects that beads bring us in contact with—biology, history, anthropology, geology, colonialization, culture, transformation of minerals, chemistry. Classifying the stones will be the work of several years and after that we will move to the other materials.

I want the objects I have to be of service to people, for the objects to help educate people about their past. This needs to be done in a place where they are valued for what they are worth and people can ask questions, learn the importance of this necklace, these beads, what the necklace was for, and what it could do again.

We can create a love for these objects, but we want a living museum that will transmit the speech and wishes of the ancestors. The beads will speak of the messages that the ancestors in their tombs have not been able to transmit. The beads will say to the people of Africa, "Stay as you are. You have looked to the sky but look around you, at the earth you are sitting on. There is something buried that is waiting for you." The beads will connect Africans with their earth. If I find the power, it is to do it in Bamako with all the good will in the world. ©

Janet Goldner is an artist who lives and works in New York City. A thirty-year cultural journey began when she first traveled to West Africa as a college student. Since Goldner's 1995 Fulbright Research Grant to Mali, she has returned frequently to Mali to continue an ongoing dialogue with Malian artists and artisans, including potters, metal workers, and contemporary painters and sculptors. She also leads groups of students to Mali in the summers through an Antioch College program.